

BARC gets help from ad group

By LANA BERKOWITZ Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

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The BARC ad campaign by American Advertising Federation-Houston includes print ads.

The homeless at Houston's formerly troubled animal shelter are getting a public-relations boost with new ads donated by the local chapter of a national advertising trade association.

The public-service campaign features billboards, TV and radio spots, and print ads promoting Friends of BARC, a nonprofit group that works with the Bureau of Animal Regulation and Control to promote animal adoption, spaying and neutering. The campaign was donated by the American Advertising Federation-Houston.

The ads star cats and dogs in somber poses, with headlines such as "Being homeless shouldn't be punishable by death," "What's happening to the animals of Houston is a crime" and "His only crime was being unwanted and unloved." The animals were volunteered by the BARC members who adopted them.

AAF-Houston received about 20 applications from a variety of nonprofits for its annual public-service initiative, said Dwight Douthit, the group's public-service director.

"No other organization presented a greater need than what was going on at BARC," he said.

The overcrowded shelter made headlines in 2009, charged with allegations of mismanagement and animal abuse. Mayor Bill White appointed David Atencio as the new general manager in December.

"The volunteers have stayed true to their mission and kept plugging away even when things looked so bleak. So we felt like the best thing to do was to support them," Douthit said.

Friends of BARC hopes the campaign will encourage people to volunteer, donate or simply take care of their pets, said Ria van Dright, who has been a Friends of BARC board member for the past five years.

"We've been through all the different directors. All the changes. Had hope and then lost hope and then had hope — over and over," she said. "So there's new management in place now, and we work really well in connection with them."

Van Dright is partial to the ads that emphasize spaying and neutering because she thinks it is the only way to solve Houston's pet overpopulation problem. She said an estimated 100,000 dogs and cats are euthanized annually at BARC and other shelters.

Unlike many shelters that turn away animals when they are full, BARC has to accept every animal that arrives. If the facility is full, pets turned in by their owners are the first to be killed.

"I just hope that people understand the message that we are trying to get across," van Dright said, "that it's really not the animals' fault they are in this situation. It's the citizens of Houston that aren't being responsible pet owners. That's what's causing this problem."

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